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Helping Children With Nightmares Subdue the Child's Monster and Trauma Dreams ©

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Parents can be overwhelmed by a child's distress upon awaking from a nightmare. Let's talk about how to calm, comfort, and reassure your child.

This is the sixth article in a series on better sleep. Please check out *10 Solutions for Better Sleep*, the *Underestimated But Crucial Role of Sleep in Mental Health*, and *Mindfulness Can Help You Sleep Better*, *Autogenic Training for Sleep*, and *Unlocking the Secrets of Nightmares*. A related article that pertains to sleep, but has wider usefulness is our series called *Quieting the Anxious Unquiet Mind*.

A devoted mother, Samantha is worried that her 8-year-old son, Alex, has been waking up distressed and frightened due to recurring nightmares. Alex said in his dreams he often sees a menacing creature lurking near his bed. Anxious at bedtime, he's now afraid to go to sleep.



It's common for children to have nightmares about monsters under the bed or someone coming to harm them or a dangerous creature. A child who has experienced a trauma – a car accident, physical harm from another person, witnessing something terrible – will often have nightmares about it. Those nightmares may have a fairly direct relationship to the event. The child does not yet have the tools

to manage these situations and their emotions.

Lets go beyond telling the child "It's only a dream. " That does not convey any new tools the child can use. It's not very reassuring to the child.

When a child experiences frequent or distressing nightmares, parents need supportive steps to help ease their child's fears and promote better sleep. Below is a comprehensive guide outlining practical strategies:

1. Establish a Consistent, Calming Bedtime Routine

A predictable routine signals to the child's brain that it's time to wind down. It reduced overall stress and anxiety.

How: Engage in relaxing activities before bed, such as reading a favorite book, taking a warm bath, listening to soothing music. Tell made up stories about a character for whom challenges and adventures work out well and parental relationships are secure. In stories, have the child be powerful enough to subdue a challenge or have an adult (or parent) step in to help make the situation work out well. Sit aside and read or talk until the child feels ready to go to sleep. That's comforting. It also provides what we call co-regulation. That means "lending" your self-control and self-soothing capacities to the child – an important way parents help children develop emotional skills.

2. Create a Safe and Comforting Sleep Environment

A secure, inviting bedroom can help counteract feelings of fear that may linger from a nightmare. Some children are comfortable in a mostly dark room and some need a nightlight or other minimal light source.

How: If darkness is a problem for the child, use a night light. Ensure the room is at a comfortable temperature, and remove items that could be perceived as scary (e.g., certain toys or images). Kids' brains create images out of folds in a blanket or a configuration of items on a shelf. So, if that happens. show the child what they feared is easily dis-assembled or removed by the parent and is no more.

3. Open Communication and Emotional Support

Talking about nightmares can help children process their emotions and feel less isolated with their fears.

How:

- Encourage your child to describe the nightmare in their own words. They may be too tearful to do that upon waking. Don't pressure the child. There is time to discuss it later.
- Validate their feelings, such as fear, by acknowledging that the experience was upsetting.

- "Of course, that sounds really scary. I'm glad you are safe."
- Reassure them that nightmares, while scary, are not real and they are safe. Wait until the child is calmer before doing this.

4. Coping Strategies to Help the Child Feel Empowerment

A child with healthy coping capacities can feel empowered and empowered children regain a sense of control over their dream experiences.

How:

- For older children, discuss simple ways they might "change" the ending of their dream. For example, ask what a "hero" character might do to save the day in the nightmare. "Joey, imagine you have a little bag of magic powder and you spray it in the monster. See what happens."
- Suggest imaginative strategies such as visualizing a protective "magic shield" or a comforting figure who makes the scary parts go away.
- Imagine a superhero entering into the story to change what happens.
- Strengthen the sense of the child's strengths – "It's so good your brain stopped the dream there so you would not be hurt."

5. Address Daytime Stress and Anxiety

Fears and anxieties experienced during the day often seep into nighttime dreams.

How:

- Help your child express their worries during the day through play, art, or conversation.
- If the child shows or expressed any fears, as most children do, do not dismiss them or tell the child it's nothing. "Yes, it seems scary. Let's try it and see. I can go first. I can hold your hand."
- Identify and reduce exposure to stressful or scary media, particularly before bedtime.

6. Introduce Relaxation and Mindfulness Techniques

Relaxation techniques can decrease overall anxiety, making it easier for children to settle into sleep.

How:

- Practice deep breathing exercises or simple guided imagery together.
- Consider using age-appropriate mindfulness activities that help the child focus on positive, calming thoughts. Many mindfulness exercises are appropriate for children. Check out the Bubbles exercise on our website in the mindfulness section.

7. Monitor and Maintain a Sleep Diary

Identify potential triggers or patterns by keeping track of when nightmares occur.

How:

- Record the frequency, timing, and any events or changes in the child's routine that coincide with the nightmares.
- Use this diary as a conversation starter with your child's pediatrician or a child therapist if needed.
- Writing them down is part of gaining control.



8. Seek Professional Guidance When Necessary

Persistent nightmares that disrupt daily functioning or lead to significant anxiety might benefit from professional intervention.

How:

- Consult your child's pediatrician for an evaluation if nightmares continue unabated.
- Consider a referral to a child therapist or a sleep specialist who can work with your child on techniques tailored to their needs.

Steps We Took With Samantha and Alex

Remember 8-year-old Alex had been waking up in distress due to recurring nightmares. Alex's dreams often involve a menacing creature that lurks near his bed, leaving him anxious at bedtime.

1. Establishing a Consistent, Calming Bedtime Routine: Samantha created a predictable routine that starts with a warm bath, followed by a quiet period of reading his favorite story while laying back against his pillows. This routine helps signal to Alex that it's time to relax and prepare for sleep.

2. Creating a Safe Sleep Environment: To counteract the fear generated by shadows and dark corners, Samantha introduced a soft nightlight source and rearranged his room to minimize any potentially scary objects. This transformed space made Alex feel secure during the night.

3. Encouraging Open Communication: After a difficult night, Samantha sat down with Alex and gently asked him to share what he experienced in his dream. By validating his feelings and asking him to think about whether that kind of event has ever happened, and then reassuring him that the nightmare isn't real, she helped him process the fear. They even discussed how, in his imagination, a superhero could appear to protect him.

4. Empowering Through Coping Strategies: For added empowerment, Samantha worked with Alex to imagine changing the ending of his nightmare. Together, they invented a story where the hero not only defeats the monster but also turns the scary scenario into a fun adventure. Over time, Alex adopted this new narrative. Then they reported fewer nightmares and a more peaceful sleep.

5. Introduce Relaxation and Mindfulness: Samantha read the Bubble exercise to Alex. That enabled him to detach from the thoughts on his mind and place those frightening thoughts in bubbles that floated away and vanished. That helped clear his mind.

Alex's nightmares nearly stopped. When he did have one he said, "Mom, I had a dream in which we partnered to destroy the monster from under the floor and he saw us and went 'Pufft' and was gone. I did it myself. When I woke up, I put the dream in a bubble and had fun poking the bubble until it popped."

If your child is troubled by nightmares, we have therapeutic techniques that may be helpful. Child therapists encounter nightmare problems in a large number of cases. This common problem can be helped.

Shorehaven Behavioral Health is a major mental health clinic and training center with therapy offices in Brown Deer, Greenfield, and Mt. Pleasant, and also offering telehealth throughout Wisconsin. We specialize in challenging cases and rapid access to services. In addition to depression, anxiety,

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